

# Adoption in Tasmania

c. 1920 –

## Details

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Adoption is the practice of placing children with people who are not their birth parents. The *Adoption of Children Act 1920* made the first legal provision for adoption in Tasmania. Prospective parents applied to the children's court and, if successful, registered with the Statistical and General Registry Department, or its successors, which managed adoptions. Prior to the 1920 Act, unofficial adoptions were organised through private connections and newspaper advertisements. Solicitors might draw up an agreement for these.

The Secretary of the Neglected Children's Department sometimes arranged for state wards to be adopted using his powers under the *Youthful Offenders, Destitute and Neglected Children's Act 1896* to place children where he thought fit. If a Secretary arranged the adoption of a Tasmanian state ward, he remained the legal guardian. The Act also provided for children's guardianship to be transferred from the Secretary to a private individual by an order of Governor-in-Council but this was seldom, if ever, used. Under either arrangement, the law required Departmental inspectors to visit the child's home.

The Department did not have to pay adoptive parents, as they did foster mothers, so cost saving was a motive behind the adoptions of wards of state. Prior to 1920, these were closely linked to the apprenticeship system. Early Departmental adoption forms included a provision for wages of sixpence a week to be banked with the Department until the child reached 21. Sometimes the form for an apprenticeship was signed but the arrangement was referred to as an adoption.

Most of these adoptions occurred in rural areas. The adoptive parents wanted prospective farm workers, domestic servants, child minders, and sometimes, company. When the child reached school leaving age, the adoptive parents signed apprenticeship papers with the Department.

Adoption forms required that the prospective parents provide the child with 'good and sufficient meat, drink, lodging, bedding, wearing apparel and all other things necessary for the said child until he is eighteen years of age'. The child had to be kept at school until school leaving age and attend the church or Sunday school of his or her religion. If inspectors found that the home was unsatisfactory, the parents surrendered the child back to the Department with a good supply of clothing. A clergyman or magistrate certified that the adopting parents were 'of sober habits and kindly character and fit persons to be entrusted with the charge and moral training of a boy (or girl)'.

A few babies of single mothers were adopted out by the Secretary of the Neglected Children's Department. However, this was rare because he tried to avoid taking responsibility for them, believing that the mother should board them out privately for a fee and find some way to support them. This arrangement was often called adoption. There was little demand for these babies from married middle class couples because, influenced by eugenic thought, they feared that the child might have inherited genetic problems.

This view changed and increasingly in twentieth century Australia, married couples who could not have children wanted to adopt these babies. Between the 1940s and early 1970s, in particular, single mothers were encouraged or forced to relinquish their babies. The difficulty of caring for and supporting a child alone and the shame associated with single motherhood played a part in this. During this period, between 210,000 and 250,000 adoptions took place in Australia. In 2012, a Senate Committee found that many of these adoptions had been

forced on birth mothers who did not want to give up their children.

Parents whose children had intellectual or physical disabilities used to receive little support to keep them at home. This led a number to offer their children to the Social Welfare Department for adoption. If these children could not be placed with adoptive parents, the Department accepted them as wards of state, if the parents made an application.

In 1961, the Child Welfare Division of the Social Welfare Department and the Catholic Private Adoption Agency, run by the Catholic Family Welfare Bureau, later Centacare, began managing adoptions. In 1968, the *Adoption of Children Act* formalised this arrangement. It also made private adoptions illegal in Tasmania and provided for the assessment of applicants to adopt a child.

In the early 1970s, the national rate of adoptions slowed, probably because of a decline in the overall birth rate, improved access to abortions, and the availability of better family planning advice. The Supporting Parents Benefit, introduced in 1973, which alleviated the financial difficulties of single motherhood, may have had an effect although by then the decline had already begun. In Tasmania, in the mid 1960s, the Department of Social Welfare offered support to single mothers who wished to keep their babies. The Department also introduced a parenting payment for single mothers, the first to do so in Australia. This too may have contributed to the decline in the number of adoptions.

In August 1982, the Social Welfare Department in Tasmania closed its adoption list. However, it continued to find adoptive parents for some babies and a small number of children that the Annual Report of 1984 described as having 'special needs', that is, older children, including wards of state and children with behavioural or emotional difficulties. The Department also processed inter-country adoptions.

In 1986, the Review of Adoption Services recommended a more open form of adoption in Tasmania. It also recommended that people who had been adopted be given better access to their birth and adoption records. It was the basis for the 1988 *Adoption of Children Act* which provided for informed consent to be given by the birth mother and father and for them to be told about their child's progress. It established the Adoption Information Service to assist birth parents and people who had been adopted to trace each other. In 2013, the Adoption Information Service is part of the Adoptions and Permanency Service within the Department of Health and Human Services.

On 12 October 2012, the Premier, Lara Giddings, apologised on behalf of the Tasmanian government to people who had been hurt by the adoption practices of the past. The Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, apologised on the Federal Government's behalf on 21 March 2013.

## More info

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### Related Entries

#### Related Events

- [Review of Tasmanian Adoption Legislation \(1985 - 1986\)](#)
- [Joint Select Committee on Adoption and Related Services 1958-1988, Tasmania \(1999\)](#)
- [Inquiry into Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices, Commonwealth of Australia \(2011 - 2012\)](#)
- [Apology to People Hurt by Past Forced Adoption Practices, Parliament of Tasmania \(2012\)](#)

#### Related Glossary Terms

- [Forced Adoption \(c. 1940 - c. 1970\)](#)  
Between about 1940 and 1970, many adoptions were forced.

#### Related Legislation

- [Adoption of Children Act 1920, Tasmania \(1920 - 1968\)](#)  
Date: 1920 - 1968
- [Adoption of Children Act 1968, Tasmania \(1968 - 1988\)](#)  
Date: 1968 - 1988
- [Adoption of Children Act 1988, Tasmania \(1988 - current\)](#)

## Related Organisations

- [Statistical and General Registry Department, State of Tasmania \(1882 - 1924\)](#)  
After 1920, the Statistical and General Registry Department administered adoptions.
- [Devon Public Hospital \(1888 - 1958\)](#)
- [Rock Lynn House \(c. 1895 - 1960\)](#)  
The staff at Rock Lynn House organised adoptions.
- [Elim Maternity Hospital \(1897 - c. 1973\)](#)  
The staff at Elim Maternity Hospital organised many adoptions.
- [Queen Victoria Maternity Hospital \(1897 - 1993\)](#)
- [Neglected Children's Department, State of Tasmania \(1901 - 1918\)](#)
- [Queen Alexandra Maternity Hospital \(1908 - 1999\)](#)
- [General Registry Department, State of Tasmania \(1924 - 1959\)](#)  
The General Registry Department administered adoptions.
- [Royal Hobart Hospital \(1938 - current\)](#)
- [Child Welfare Division \(c. 1953 - 1980\)](#)  
The Child Welfare Division managed adoptions.
- [Registrar-General's Department, State of Tasmania \(1959 - 1972\)](#)  
Until 1961, the Registrar-General's Department administered adoptions.
- [Catholic Family Welfare Bureau \(Tasmania\) \(1959 - 1977\)](#)
- [Karadi \(c. 1960 - 1980?\)](#)  
The staff at Karadi organised adoptions.
- [Social Welfare Department, State of Tasmania \(1961 - 1983\)](#)
- [Centacare Tasmania \(1977 - 2015\)](#)
- [Department for Community Welfare, State Government of Tasmania \(1983 - 1989\)](#)
- [Department of Community Services, State of Tasmania \(1989 - 1993\)](#)
- [Department of Community and Health Services, State of Tasmania \(1993 - 1998\)](#)
- [Department of Health and Human Services, State of Tasmania \(1998 - current\)](#)
- [Department of Communities Tasmania \(2018 - 2022\)](#)

## Resources

- Quartly, Marian; Swain, Shurlee; Cuthbert, Denise; Drefus, Kay and Taft, Margaret, *The market in babies: stories of Australian adoption*, 2013
- [Jane Monaghan interviewed by Caroline Evans for the Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants oral history project](#), 30 August 2012
- [Les Batchelor interviewed by Caroline Evans for the Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants oral history project](#), 7 February 2012
- [David Bartlett interviewed by Caroline Evans for the Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants oral history project](#), 22 June 2011 - 24 June 2011
- *Department of Social Welfare: report for the year ended 30 June 1971*, 1971
- Cunningham, Anne, *Background paper for the Minister of Community and Health Services on issues relating to historical adoption practices in Tasmania*, 4 December 1996
- Richards, Blair, [Forced adoptions heartache](#), The Mercury, 9 October 2011
- *Mum tell of years of torment*, The Mercury, 1 March 2012
- [Young mothers 'drugged, shamed' inquiry told](#), ABC news, 11 December 2011

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